

English Proficiency for Employability – an Exploratory-Confirmatory Study

Anupama S.B

Research Scholar,
Deptt. of English,
Jain University,
Bangalore

Thriyambaka S.

Professor and Head,
Deptt. of English,
Jain University,
Jaynagar, Bangalore

Abstract

It is well known that English is one of the major components of a suite of tests usually conducted by job recruiting agencies. It is also true that management schools in the country have been increasing in number rapidly. Consequently a great number of undergraduates from all branches of study are seeking admission in these business schools. Naturally one cannot dispute the fact that not all the students who seek admission are capable of absorbing the training and instructions in other skills made available in management schools. In these circumstances it is quite pertinent for a soft skills trainer to make an assessment of training in soft skills, given over a period of three months in the first year of MBA course. So with a view to making a systematic assessment of their achievement in English, these researchers conducted four tests in English [LSRW].

The test were administered to a group of second year MBA students of a private funded management school in suburban Bangalore city. The students were also administered a socio-Economic survey questionnaire as a part of the study.

This paper presents the results of the exploratory-confirmatory study of the proficiency in English of a group of second year MBA students, so as to find out to what extent their skills match with the needs of the industry. The target students were given tests in LSRW following the model of BEC higher paper. It is believed that results will help us to identify any inadequacies in our existing training program. A remedial course will be conducted on the basis of the results.

Keywords: Proficiency, Employability, Training, Skills, Assessment.

Introduction

English, an associate official language of India is now a global language. The emergence of global English has turned out to be a lucky event for India. In the last three decades it has played a crucial role in the rejuvenation of the Indian Economy. Incidentally it has also bequeathed peace and prosperity on its users. English has also been doing a commendable job as the 'lingua-franca' developing and sustaining a cordial relationship between peoples of different cultures and language groups in all spheres of life. Despite the fact that, English is both colonial and global in character we need to pay serious attention to its global character at this juncture so as to harness the beneficial impact of English language in the field of education, trade and commerce, communication, social governance etc.

We cannot ignore the fact that it is the knowledge of English that facilitated the processes of globalization of the economy which eventually ushered in an era of steady and rapid economic growth. In this context it is worthwhile reading what Prabhu (1994) says in this regard. According to Prabhu (1994, 53-55) 'English is acting as the interface between India and the world outside it, being the vital channel for technical and commercial information transfer across the world'. It is also an accepted fact that we are living in a 'knowledge economy', the sustenance of which depends on our ability to access, synthesize, analyze and use information which is being generated at the rate of twenty trillion bits a day. (Prof U.R. Rao, 2005). Unless we become knowledge generators and develop our own indigenous technology we will be forced to consume obsolete technology and we will be enslaving ourselves to borrowed second hand knowledge.

Further more, it is an indisputable fact that the conceptual frame work of the knowledge base is structured in English. Prabhu (1994, 59) declares that English is not just a transactional medium across large parts of the world but most significantly it is the medium of the knowledge paradigm itself, which has spread across the present day world. It is this knowledge paradigm that constitutes much of the academic content of formal education, especially higher education in different parts of the world

and it is within this paradigm that the learned professionals seek to advance their understanding in different fields. The actual language of formal education or professional discussion may not always be English but it is English that provides the most direct access to relevant sources of knowledge which makes it a disadvantage in the pursuit of knowledge not to know the language.

In view of the points cited above one cannot but conclude that among the tens and thousands of job seekers in our country only those who possess good proficiency in both spoken and written English alone are likely to get an opportunity to partake in knowledge generation and contribute to the development of the knowledge paradigm on equal footing with people from other developed and developing countries.

In view of the forgoing, one cannot but infer that a reasonable proficiency in both spoken and written English is a major determinant of employability. Consequently it becomes a responsibility of the universities and other educational institutions to ensure the steady availability of adequately equipped and trained young women and men possessing a reasonable proficiency in English for handling the varied kinds of jobs that are being offered in tens and thousands by business ventures all over the globe.

In response to the growing demands of the industry we find a huge number of students entering the portals of the university enrolling themselves for UG and PG courses in Business Administration and Management Studies. However, we need to ensure that all these educated people will be successful in the job market. In this context it would be highly rewarding to look at the report of two researchers. Surve and Pradhan (2013) opine that there is going to be an increase of 26 % in Indian IT exports and IT enabled services. Consequently, the IT sector will be expanding its work force. These researchers state that our country would not be able to find qualified workers in adequate number as forecasted by NASSCOM because 1/4 graduates who pass out of university every year, have the ability to work in IT/ITES/BPO industries. They opine that our country needs to "harness and update the employability skills especially the communication skills of its future work force". From this study we can infer that not all the students who enroll for a post graduate degree possess the requisite proficiency in spoken and written English we also know that such students come from a great variety of socio economic, cultural and educational environments making a typical MBA of BBA class a heterogeneous mixture of students with different scholastic abilities. Having realized the need for remedying their inadequacies in students' scholastic and communicative abilities a majority of MBA colleges have included a soft skills training programme either as an audit course or As a value added course in the curriculum. Obviously their objective is to hone the communication skills of their students and to facilitate them to perform successfully in the end of the term 'placement interviews' normally conducted by recruitment agencies.

Objectives of the Pilot Study

In view of the forgoing, these researchers intended to conduct an empirical study on a large sample of managerial aspirants pursuing MBA course in and around Bangalore city. This pilot study is a part of their main study.

Its objectives are

1. To assess the entry level proficiency of the students in English who had undergone a soft skills course in the second semester of their MBA course.
2. To gather information about their socio cultural and educational background.

The researchers hope that the data gathered from this pilot study will help them to identify the difficulty level at which the final test instruments for assessing proficiency have to be pitched at. Secondly the researchers need information regarding the problems and other factors that might have a bearing on their final study.

Pilot Study

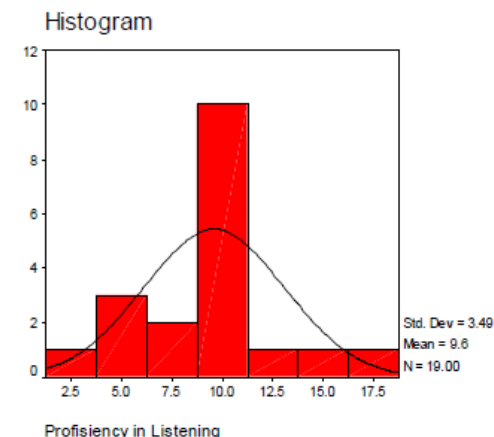
There were nineteen students in the group and are in the age group of 21 to 24. There were ten girls and nine boys in the group. Excepting one male student who comes from Bangalore city, all the other students come from different rural districts nearby Bangalore city. Secondly they all come from small nuclear families and the total members of the families of the whole group come to 79. The target group was administered a socio-economic survey questionnaire so as to collect information about their socio-economic and educational background. They were also given a proficiency test in English which comprised separate tests in LSRW. A BEC Higher Practice Test Paper was used for this purpose.

The Listening Test Focused On

1. Listening for and noting specific information.
2. Listening to identify the topic, context, function, speakers opinion etc
3. Listening for gist, specific information, attitudes etc.

These three skills were tested using a gap filling, multiple matching and three option multiple choice test types. There were altogether twenty items in the test paper and the listening paper carried a total score of 30 marks. The average score of the whole group was 9.5. The lowest score is 2 on 30 and the highest score is 17 on 30.

Proficiency in Listening

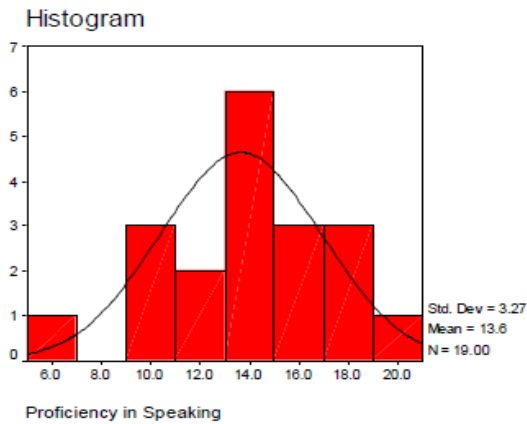


The Test of Speaking Focused On

1. Conversation between the interlocutor and each candidate. The students were encouraged to talk about their future plans and give personal information about themselves.
2. A mini presentation by each candidate on a business theme
3. Two way conversation between candidates followed by further prompting from the interlocutor.

Each candidate was expected to speak for three minutes in the first test, for about six minutes in the second test, and for about seven minutes in the third test. They were marked for accurate and appropriate use of grammatical and lexical forms and for producing comprehensible utterances showing awareness of the use of stress, rhythm and clear individual sounds. Attention was also paid to discourse management (coherence and relevance of each candidate's individual performance). The speaking test was weighted to 30 marks. The average score of the group was 13.6. The lowest score and the highest score of the individuals were 8 and 24 on 30 respectively.

Proficiency in Speaking

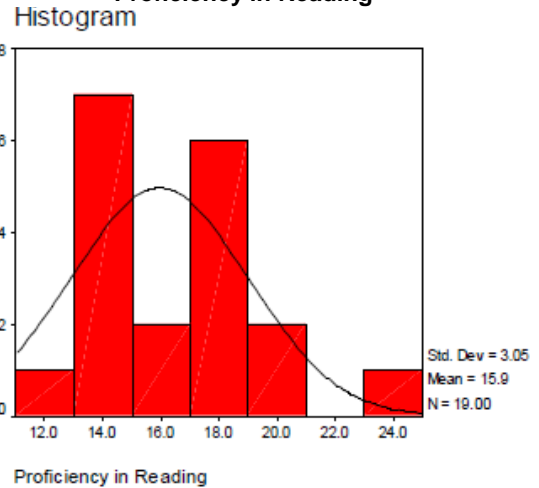


The Reading Test Focused on the Following Skills

1. Reading for the gist and global meaning.
2. Reading for structure and detail.
3. Understanding general points and specific details.
4. Reading-vocabulary and structure.
5. Reading-structure and discourse features.
6. Reading-understanding sentence structure; error identification.

All the tests used authentic business related source material and there were totally 52 items. The total score was weighted to 30 marks for the full reading paper. The average score for the group was 15.9. The lowest score was 11 and highest score was 23 on 30.

Proficiency in Reading



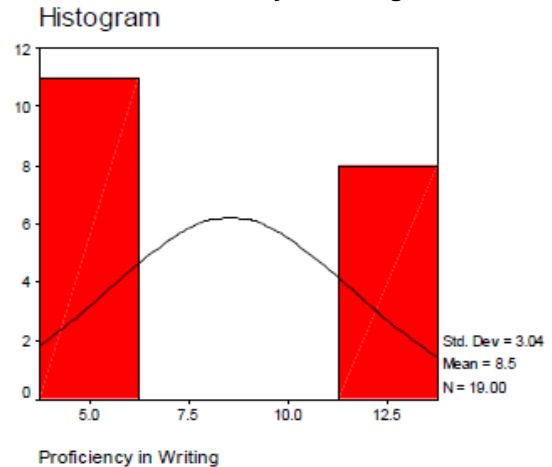
The Test of Writing Skill Focused On

1. Describing or comparing figures from graphic input making inferences
2. Report : - Describing and summarizing
3. Proposal:-Describing,summarizing, recommending and persuading
4. Correspondence

The candidates were required to produce two pieces of writing – a short report and any one of the three [2, 3, and 4].

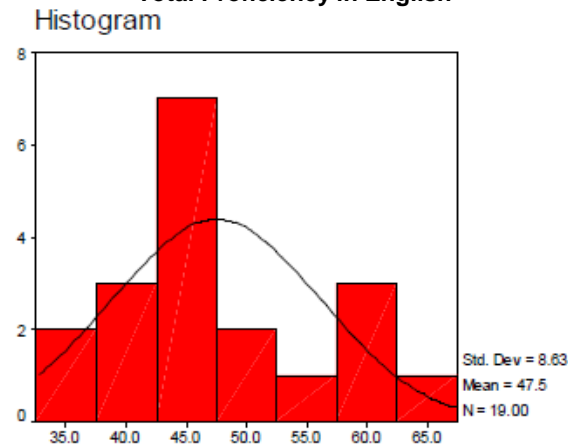
The average score for the whole group was 8.5. The lowest score was 6 and the highest was 12 on 30.

Proficiency in Writing



The lowest total proficiency is 40 and lowest proficiency is 60 on 120. The average score of the group on the total proficiency was 47.47 on 120.

Total Proficiency in English



Findings and Discussion

From an examination of the scores and the available demographic data it is evident that the performance of the students is not commensurate with the expectations of the employment industry.

It is hypothesized that the students have not been able to perform at the expected level because of a probable mismatch between the soft skill training programme given to the students and their proficiency at the entry level. Usually the soft skill training programme designed by the university has the following components:

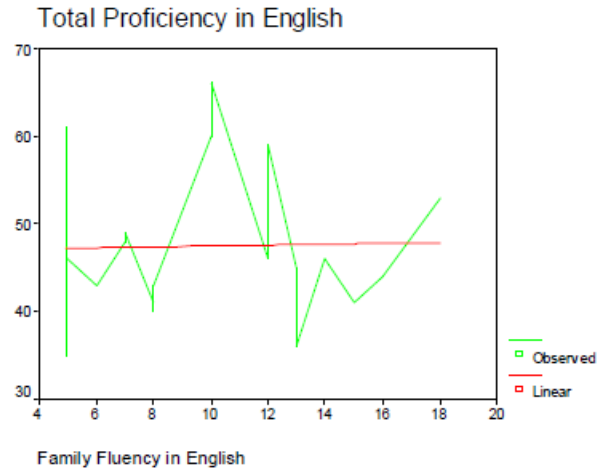
1. Lectures on verbal and nonverbal communication
2. Writing business letters, memos, proposals, reports etc
3. Group discussion
4. Interview skills
5. Lectures related to share market and other business ventures.

The researchers would like to state that the time spent on teaching the topics mentioned above is very limited considering the amount of information to be transacted in the class. Moreover most of the topics are just introduced by the lecturers and are not followed up with practical training. This is so because probably the curriculum framers take into account the number of years of instruction in English to which the students have been exposed to. Normally, those who enroll for PG courses will have studied English either from class five to second year degree as a compulsory subject in government schools or from class one to second degree in English medium schools. The quantum of exposure to English determines their performance on these tests. Secondly the quality and quantity of the exposure to English is also determined by the school where they have studied, the language used in the English class room, and the prestige enjoyed by the school.

It is evident from an examination of the performance of the target group that the target group students come from an acquisition-poor- environment for English (Tickoo). The demographic details of the group shows that there are nine total illiterates, one member who has studied upto class five, seven members who have studied upto class seven, two members who have studied upto class eight, ten members upto PUC, one member upto diploma and

thirty one members upto degree including nineteen students of the target group and three members upto PG. It is easy to imagine the quantum of English available in the family for each member of the group and their fluency in English. This gets reflected in the graph below. Irrespective of the number of educated members present in the family, family fluency in English remains the same because there are only 31 graduates in a group of 79 members.

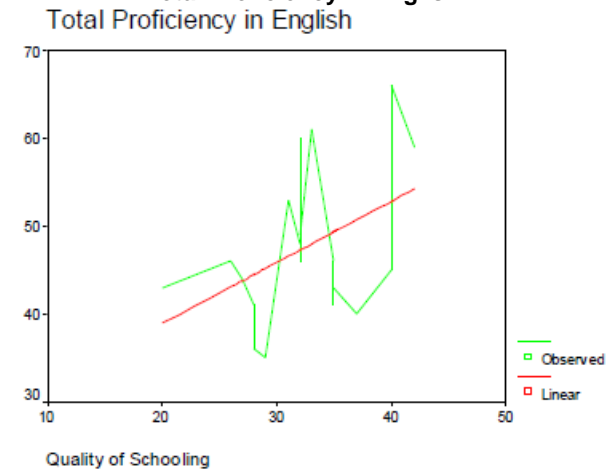
Family Fluency in English



Naturally the correlation between family fluency in English and the total proficiency in English appears to be insignificant. However I am not in a position to say anything decisively in this regard.

However there is a strong correlation between the quality of schooling and total proficiency in English. From the graph below it can be inferred that better the quality of schooling higher the proficiency in English.

Total Proficiency in English



Before I conclude I would like to make a few observations about the post communicative English language learning and teaching scenario in India .I am citing the remarks made by Simon Andrews, in Modern English teacher, vol 20, number 2. He opines that the social context that gave rise to classical communicative language teaching can be seen to have changed discernibly in the last two decades. The typical scenario of the language learner is no longer that of the skilled worker sent abroad to an English speaking country. The skilled worker-learner may still

be in his or her own country and may be working in a multinational company. Yet nevertheless the language the company has chosen as the medium of communication among its workers is English: English as lingua franca.

English speaking corporate environments have broken free of their national bases in the BANA countries. [Britain, Australia, and North America] and have spread to all corners of the world and economy. Today they are common in non-native as well as native speaker global business enterprises in which English is the means of communication without the presence of a native speaker.

What are the Implications?

Corporate English and English in academic and higher professional education are two main contexts in which English is being used today. The goals in post communicative English scenario have changed which are reflected in pedagogical practices. For example minor grammatical inaccuracies are today considered to be tolerable especially with regard to the idiosyncrasies of native-speaker English such as consistent use of third person 's', our impossible prepositions and the complicated use of articles along with the question of the countability and uncountability of certain nouns.

On the other hand the clear organization and development of ideas through logical coherence and consistency count far more than the traditional nuts and bolts of grammar. Simon Andrews says that there has been a shift of focus from grammatical detail to macro structures of discourse.

Secondly teaching English as lingua-franca has less room for idioms, idiomatic language in general, native speaker intonation pattern etc. Features of natural native speaker's speech such as the schwa, weak forms, assimilation, elision, coalescence and linking will be given a lower priority. English used as a lingua-franca is slow English. ELF is not the communication of kitchen commenting intimacy but more the language of public speaking of the business meeting or negotiations of the University seminar where clear enunciation, a manageably deliberate and slow delivery and rhetorical devices such as reputation and paraphrasing count for more than native speaker like pronunciation and related communicative conjunctions. The teaching material should focus on developing intercultural awareness, global issues and study skills.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to say that we need to become sensitive to the needs of the students. Here it means that, since most of these students come from a rural background and an acquisition poor environment (Tickoo, 1993), we need to acquaint them with the unique features of people from other cultures. We need to show them video clippings and other media materials so that they can see for themselves what work places spread across the globe look like. Such lessons are very important because in the work places of today, we do not find people of only one culture but people from diverse cultures. It will give the students a picture of what kind of skills they need to acquire and how to conduct themselves in such work environments. Furthermore, since these students are found deficient in their

knowledge of the structure of English language, they should be exposed to a bridge course designed to hone their communication skills and bring them on par with their other peers who have reasonable proficiency in English. Thanks to the pervasive presence of western media and digital technology. The teacher can choose the right kind of materials for their students. The teacher's role here is very crucial because without teacher's guidance most of the rural students are likely to suffer a culture shock and might become the victims of an inferiority complex. In order to prevent such instances we must take into account some of the points mentioned above and develop training materials exclusively for each group of students.

References

Book

1. Agnihotri, R. K. & Khanna, A.L. (1997). *Problematizing English in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
2. Perry, Jr. & Fred, L. (1996). *Research in Applied Linguistics: Becoming a Discerning Consumer*. New York: Longman.
3. Das, Gurucharan. (2003). *India Unbound*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin Books.
4. Makhan, Tickoo (1993). *When is a language worth teaching? Native Languages and English in India: Language, Culture and Curriculum*.

Journals

5. Prabhu, N. S. (1994). The Mathetic Function of English as a world Language. *JEFL*, 13&14, 41-52.
6. Kumara, vadivelu B. (2002). From Coloniality to Globality: [Re] visioning English language education in India. *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 28(2), 45- 61.
7. Simon, Andrews, Communicative Language Learning: Communicating for what purpose. *Modern English Teacher*, 20(2), 5 -12.
8. Surve, Anshu and Pradhan, Shyamal (2013). Communication Skills for Global Managers: Demand & Divide. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Business Environment perspectives*, 2(2), 426-435.

News Paper

9. Rao, U.R. (2005, Jan 10). Quality must match Quantity: Vision 2005. *The Times of India*, p.